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ABSTRACT

Maintaining that the sociological implications of violence on television should be a serious concern to law-related education (LRE) professionals, this bulletin describes the importance of the television media, examines the effects of violent television programs, and discusses possible implications for LRE educators. Included in the pamphlet is an eight-item annotated resource list to be used by members of the LRE community interested in helping to educate students about violence on television. The pamphlet concludes that through increased attention to the problem of violence on television, young people may become wise consumers of television programming and thus can better influence the overall quality of television programming. Contains 18 references. (TSV)

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# Vicarious Violence on TV: A Challenge to LRE. Technical Assistance Bulletin No. 16.

by Mary A. Hepburn

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# Vicarious Violence on TV: A Challenge to LRE

By Mary A. Hepburn

Portrayals of violence on television and the ways in which they socialize young people are serious concerns of LRE educators. We wonder whether the daily diet of violence in TV dramas, serials, and cartoons is influencing young people to consider violent behavior as an acceptable way of life. Critics have been warning that designers of commercial TV entertainment consider violent action part of the formula for holding viewers. For instance, in a recent lecture on this campus, public broadcasting newsman Daniel Schorr pointed out that "Nothing works better on television than dramas of conflict and violence.... Violence is the way to get on television." Schorr and other critics have observed that violence on the screen is one way of seizing the attention of "channel surfers," gaining a higher Nielsen rating, and thus having a "higher market share" that can be sold to advertisers for higher prices. Consequently, when young viewers scan the channels to select entertainment in dramas, movies, or cartoons, they are very likely to be confronted with high-speed chases, beatings, stabbings, cruel and hateful expressions, and other grim and bloody attacks on people and animals. Graphically depicted are attacks on family members, friends, pets, whole groups or gangs, and random individuals. The scenes and sounds of cruel and violent behavior can be seen daily on many channels, at nearly any hour, by any viewer.

Educators of law and citizenship need to be informed about the research regarding the effects of viewing violence on TV. Likewise, educators must consider the implications of that research to determine what information and what teaching approaches can contribute to the reduction of violence in our society.

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## The Long Reach of Television into American Households

Television is the main source of entertainment and the main source of news and information in the United States. Nearly 100 percent of households have television; more than two-thirds of these households have two or more sets. Cable TV is found in about 65 percent of American homes, and it is greatly increasing the number of networks and programs that can be accessed. Children readily learn the TV-viewing lifestyle from the adults around them. The most voracious consumers are women and men over 55 (respectively viewing approximately 44 hours and 39 hours weekly). Men and women aged 25–54 view an average of roughly 30 hours of TV per week. Children ages 2–11 view about 23 hours of TV a week, and teenagers, 12–17, watch about 22 hours per week (Nielsen 1993). Within these averages, Nielsen reports differences among ethnic groups. For example, in 1992–93, in African-American households, children 2–11 years old watched 55 percent more television than children of the same age in other households, and African American teenagers, 12–17, watched 1 hour and 40 minutes more television during the 8 to 11 P.M. prime-time hours than did teenagers in other households.

The point of reflecting on such data is to understand how pervasive television viewing is in the United States. Although television is the most available and most used means of entertainment, it is also the most relied on source of news. Over the past three decades, television has surpassed newspapers and radio to become the **main** source of news for Americans. By 1986 half of Americans said they depended completely on television for news on public issues (National Association of Broadcasters, 1993), and there is every indication that these numbers are growing. Because television viewing is a way of life, popular programs have a broad and deep reach into American households and must be viewed as having vast and subtle power in the socialization of young people. What, then, are the effects of the heavy doses of violence they see?

## The Cumulative Effects of Viewing Violence

A story in the morning newspaper suggests that some dramatizations of violence can glorify a violent lifestyle and have horrific and sad effects. A 15-year-old youth from a small town south of Atlanta shot and killed both parents as they watched TV. His parents had been married 19 years, and the family was perceived by relatives and friends to be "a strong and loving family." Investigators learned that the young man and several of his friends had been excited by the movie video *Natural Born Killers* and had outlined a plan to pattern their lives after its heroes. They wrote notes to each other referring to Mickey and Mallory, the couple in the movie who "killed 52 people in three weeks." The notes they exchanged revealed plans to "kill our parents,... rob a pawn shop, and make our way across the country." "Let's kill 'til we are killed" (Morehouse, 1995).

Could one video have this effect? That doesn't seem likely. Research suggests that it is much more likely that the attraction to violence is a cumulative effect of many hours and many years of television and movie viewing by young people who have built up no critical resistance. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average youth, by age 18, will have viewed 200,000 acts of violence on television (Hendrick, 1995). Piecing together research by doctors, communications specialists, and social scientists provides some insight into the effects of viewing violence.

During the first decades of large-scale television viewing in the United States, it was widely accepted that viewing violence in stories presented on television would likely have a cathartic effect on youngsters and possibly alleviate aggressive feelings that might be expressed in real-life relationships. But now an expanding volume of research refutes the old notion that daily viewing of vicarious violence is harmless.

Eron and Huesmann (1984; see also Huesmann and Eron, 1986) studied the effects of media violence on youngsters in the 1970s and found that the action on the TV screen was very real to children. Their longitudinal research showed that children who were heavy viewers of TV violence were more likely to act out violent scenes as youngsters, were more aggressive as teenagers, and were more prone to aggression and crime in adulthood. TV viewing apparently served as a "script" to learning that aggressive or violent behavior is appropriate in given life situations. Following their original subjects into adult life, Eron and Huesmann found that those who had the most arrests for drunk driving, violent crime, and abuse of their spouses were the heaviest viewers and most aggressive reactors to TV when they were children.

This year the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a warning to pediatricians and parents regarding the adverse effects of media violence on children. The AAP finds that there is an average of five violent acts per hour on prime-time programs and 26.4 violent acts per hour on children's programs! Dr. Vic Strasburger, coauthor of the AAP policy statement, has stated, "It's the cumulative effects, year after year. We are desensitizing even normal kids. We're making guns more glamorous, violence seem absolutely ordinary and everyday." The AAP policy statement states that the vast majority of studies concludes that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between heavy viewing of media violence and real-life violence (Hendrick, 1995).

In research that compared people in areas with and without television and also compared crime statistics in areas before and after the introduction of TV, Centerwall (1993) determined that homicide rates increased markedly when TV was introduced. Centerwall specifies that viewing violence on television is not the only influence on the numbers of violent crimes in a region, but his quantitative evidence shows "there would be 10,000 fewer homicides, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults" if the negative effects of television could be removed.

Earlier research, conducted by the major networks and generally unheard of today among the educators who have been working to reduce violence, also deserves our attention. Studies were initiated in the 1970s in reaction to public complaints and national hearings regarding children's exposure to aggression and violence on TV. The three major television networks at that time agreed to support research to address these concerns.

CBS commissioned a study of 1,565 teenage boys, 12–17, in London in the seventies (Belson, 1978). The research, which included extensive observations and interviews, revealed that boys who watched above-average hours of TV

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violence before adolescence committed a 49 percent higher rate of serious acts of violence than those who had viewed below-average quantities of violence. Although the study was conducted in London, many of the TV programs were imported from the United States, and the head of the research team made it clear that the findings were relevant to cities with similar violent television content. The research concluded that "high exposure to television violence increases the degree to which boys engage in serious violence." It is interesting that the heavy viewers of violence in the study seemed unaware of the changes that took place in them. Their negative attitudes toward violence appeared unchanged even though their behavior was changing. The continuous viewing of violence apparently gradually broke down those inhibitions against being violent that are normally taught by parents and others. This research was published by a Westmead, England, publishing house and had very limited dissemination in the United States.

In the study commissioned by the ABC network, a Temple University research team conducted surveys of young male felons who had been imprisoned for violent crimes. They found that up to 34 percent of the felons, especially the most violent ones, said they had consciously imitated criminal acts that they learned from heavy viewing of television programs (Centerwall, 1993).

The poor dissemination of the outcomes of these studies remind us of tobacco company studies on the ill effects of smoking. Why haven't we heard about this 20-year-old research? An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* offers one perspective on why the findings of the network studies on TV violence are not well-known. Slaby (1993) explains that "until recently, researchers' voices have been drowned out in the din of denial and disinformation coming from executives of the television and movie industries, whose self-serving defense of violent programming has prevailed." Further, he describes a wide gap between the research-documented conclusions of psychological and medical researchers and the sparse information that educators and the general public have about the effects of heavy viewing of violence in TV programs and movies.

The American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth sought to get the word out to educators in a 1993 report. It concluded that the research evidence was very clear and that there was no doubt that the high levels of violence seen on television programs, day after day, were clearly correlated with increased acceptance of aggression and outright aggressive behavior. Moreover, the highest levels of consumption of television violence are by those young people who are most vulnerable to its effects because of little moderation by parents or/and school (Slaby, 1994; Institute for Social Research, 1994; see also Holroyd, 1985; and Zuckerman and Zuckerman, 1985).

A recent comparative international study of television viewing by adolescents has documented that television now plays a pivotal role in family behavior and relationships

## Teaching Resources

J. Splaine, *Educating the Consumer of Television.* Pacific Grove, CA 93950 (P.O. Box 448): Critical Thinking Press, 1995. Provides background information for teachers, describes the concepts and skills needed by students, and contains questions and activities, including ways to use primary sources videotaped from television programs. Designed especially for grades 5–9.

Sherrye Dee Garrett, Jean Frey, Michael Wildasin, and Renee Hobbs, *Messages & Meaning: A Guide to Understanding Media,* 1994. Sponsored by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, International Reading Association, and the National Council for the Social Studies. Endorsed by the Canadian Daily Newspapers Association. Obtain through Georgia Newspapers in Education, Georgia Press Association, 3066 Mercer University Drive, Suite 200, Atlanta, GA 30341; 404/872-2467.

J. Schwoch, M. White, and S. Reilly, *Media Knowledge.* Albany, NY 12246-0001: SUNY Press, 1993. Reading material for teachers on the contemporary media and pop culture, relating them to critical citizenship education. Encourages critical study rather than passive reception of media, including TV news and entertainment and Hollywood films.

*Nielsen Report on Television, 1992–93.* New York, NY 10171: Nielsen Media Research, 1993. Contains statistical data from Nielsen studies on TV usage, viewing populations, top-ranked programs, and viewing of political events.

D. G. Singer and J. L. Singer, *Creating Critical Viewers.* Denver, CO 80218-1661: Pacific Mountain Network, 1991. Lesson book with videotape material includes lessons for analyzing television content and gaining knowledge of television careers. Funded by the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

J. A. Brown, *Television Critical Viewing Skills Education.* Hillside, NJ 07642: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991. Listing and review of education projects around the United States that have promoted or studied television literacy and critical viewing skills. Includes an extensive list of information sources and bibliography through the 1980s.

Donna Lloyd-Kolkin and Kathleen R. Tyner, *Media and You.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632: Educational Technology Publications, 1991. 170 pages. This book of lessons for elementary grades contains teacher background information and student activities that are aimed at teaching about mass media production techniques, entertainment, advertising, and news. Permission is given to teachers to reproduce all worksheets in this book for classroom use.

Q. J. Schultze, R. M. Anker, et al. *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Pop Culture, and the Electronic Media.* Grand Rapids, MI 49503: W. B. Eerdsmans Publishing Co., 1991. Discussions of various types of electronic pop culture and provision of a framework for examining the different standards by which students can review media, including technical excellence, aesthetic expressiveness, breadth of social outreach, economic worth, and moral and religious integrity.

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(Shanahan and Morgan, 1992). When television viewing behavior was compared across several nations, it was found that in homes in the United States, unlike those in the other countries studied, TV sets were on nearly continuously during waking hours. The researchers also found that American adolescents were much more likely to watch TV alone or with their friends, rather than with family members, as was more common in Argentina or China. Another interesting finding of this research was that children who watched television with their parents expressed greater closeness to their parents than those who did not. Other research on the family and media (Wright et al., 1994) indicates that children's assessment of the reality or unreality of what they see on television is affected by their parents' beliefs about the social realism of television.

This year the Center for Communication Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, released its study of violent content in movies and television programs. UCLA researchers have monitored the content of shows on the four leading broadcast networks—ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC—and they reported that although some decrease in violence content was found in adult prime-time shows, violence has not been reduced in children's programs and television movies (UCLA, 1995). Their report calls for schools to incorporate media studies or media literacy into classroom lessons that will involve students in reflecting on how TV presents life.

In summary, the negative influences of violence on the television screen are related to (a) heavy viewing of violence in TV and video dramas, (b) the lack of mediating influences by family or peers, and (c) the need for critical media studies in education.

## Implications and Directions for Citizenship/Law-Related Education

What can we do in LRE and citizenship education to address and attempt to moderate the negative effects of the daily viewing of violence on television by youth? Keeping informed about the research is an obvious first step. Studies of the effects of viewing violence on the electronic media come from several disciplines, including psychology, sociology, pediatrics, and mass communications. Until recently, those studies have been difficult to monitor. Teachers have been unaware of the research that links violent behavior to cumulative viewing of violence. Moreover, the textbooks and training programs used in the social studies education of teachers have not included studies of the mass media or discussion of the skills needed for critical evaluation of TV content. Some pioneering work is needed in social studies education.

LRE curriculum developers and teacher-educators, however, have been focused on the broader issues of violence in society and have been involved in educational efforts to reduce violence. Likewise, LRE and citizenship education programs have been strong promoters of critical thinking. Consequently, lessons about media violence appear to be well-suited to teacher training and classroom activities in LRE. TV is a topic in which young people already have high interest. It should be a short instructional step forward to move them into structured evaluation and critical thinking. Consider the following approaches to utilizing and applying the research:

1. **First Amendment Freedom of Speech.** One public response to television violence has been a demand for censorship. Educators can plan lessons that review the research and then evaluate the pros and cons of such a censorship policy. What would be the effects of imposing national or regional censorship on television programs? Who would decide what dramas, cartoons, and prime-time shows are "too violent"? Who would be the censors? What would be the criteria for keeping shows off the air? What precedents have been established in previous free speech cases? As an alternative, could networks review or censor their own programs in an effort to reduce violent programming? This is a public issue that is likely to generate interest because it has a great deal of personal connection to students' lives.

2. **The V-Chip Alternative.** Congress is considering legislation that would require technology in new television sets that will allow parents to control viewing of programs that they consider to be too violent. The V-chip in the TV set will allow parents to block programs either according to rating or by individual selection. Students can examine why there has been a groundswell of support for the V-chip from both political parties and consider how it is an alternative to censorship. Students can also discuss the feasibility of the proposed technological change to television sets, including whether parents will have the time and the know-how to use it effectively. Here again, there is a personal connection to student life and a very clear context for assessing whether the V-chip will be effective.

3. **Critical Analysis Activities.** Another approach to the study of violence on television is to review the research discussed above with students and use it as a starting point for their own group determination of the amount of violence on TV. Here is an issue demanding information, inquiries, comparisons, and critical discussion (Hepburn, 1990, 1995). Students can be organized into teams that will monitor and tabulate the acts of violence on television programs received on local stations selected during viewing hours when young children and adolescents watch. Late afternoon, prime time, Saturday mornings, and late shows on Friday and Saturday nights can be monitored for several weeks as the basis of further critical discussion. Students can consider these and other questions: "How intense is the violence we see each day on the screen?" "Are there subtle or obvious influences?" "What is it doing to me, to my friends, to my society?"

4. **Redesigning Programs So That They Present Less Visual and Oral Violence.** Subsequent to the kinds of





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"deconstruction" activities suggested above, in which students critically analyze TV programs and videos as they look for unnecessary and overly explicit violence, students can increase their awareness and advance their writing and creative skills by constructing programs that are informational and entertaining without the violence. Students can become quite engaged in discussing how they could retain the message or the humor but improve its presentation. Many enjoy rewriting, or even reenacting, improved sections of a program or movie showing how gratuitous violence in TV and video presentations can be avoided.

5. **Being Aware of Market Share.** Another approach is that of educating consumers of television. Teachers and students can readily obtain copies of Nielsen ratings of TV shows from local libraries, television stations, or the Nielsen offices. They can discuss the generalization that more action and more violence tend to attract more viewers. Then they can discuss the potential power of consumers: If fewer people watch gratuitously violent programs and more people express their objections to them, will advertisers lose interest as the program loses "market share"? And, will they pay to advertise on better quality shows?

6. **Activities Involving the Family and Community.** LRE activities that examine the mass media could benefit from involving parents in reviews and discussions of the content of programs, the cumulative hours of viewing, and the influences on the aspirations and fears of their children. The study by Shanahan and Morgan (1992) could be discussed. Students can assess how parents can make a difference in how their children select programs and in the ways in which children respond to the programs they view. Students can involve parents and other adults in reflecting on the research regarding the behavioral effects of TV and the implications that parent and school mediation and moderation of violent dramas and cartoons can help reduce negative effects. The data and possibilities regarding "market share" can also be discussed with parents and community leaders. Open discussions of these issues are becoming more prominent. CNN initiated discussion on the issue within a series of programs on the decline of civility in the United States. Questions were raised about a society in which many youngsters are so attuned to the color, sound, and movement of the TV media that they cannot pay attention long enough to learn to read. C-SPAN has covered several lively panel discussions on the mass media's influence on children. Such public discussions are stimulating citizen awareness and thought about the infusion of dramatized violence into American households.

The current public climate regarding TV and movie entertainment appears to be sympathetic to critical analysis in schools and community. There is evidence that the American public is becoming increasingly negative about the influence of television on young people. A national opinion poll of 1,209 adults conducted by *The New York Times* in July 1995 revealed that over half of the adults "could not think of a single good thing to say about television." They found that nearly 80 percent of Americans say they believe that the fictional world of violence and sex on the screen contributes to the way in which young people behave in real life (Kolbert, 1995). Family and community can become real copartners in this effort.

## Conclusion

Through awareness and critical thinking activities in LRE, through family involvement and reflection, and through public interest and community involvement, we may be able to help young citizens, and ultimately all citizens, choose programs more carefully and thus influence programming in the direction of improved quality. Dramatized violence on the television screen is not the only factor in violent youth behavior, but it may be one of the most remediable factors that LRE educators can address.

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